

How To Be Happy – 22 Life-Changing Secrets Of Personal Growth And Fulfilment

Are you truly happy? Is happiness a passing feeling or a state of being for you?

Tons of articles (and books) have been written about how to be happy, and there is some good information out there. I have read and synthesized hundreds of hours of research and experiments here for you, in this action-driven article.

What you will find is some deep, life-changing stuff (if you are looking for some “quick tips” instead, check out [this post](#)).

If you think that all talk about “how to be happy” is fluffy material and common sense, you are in it for a change. There is a theory in Psychology called the

There is a theory in Psychology called the *hedonic treadmill*, which says that great events (like winning a lottery) and terrible events (like losing a leg) can happen in your life, but after a while you are always back to your “baseline happiness”. If that is true, then more important than trying to change your external life is to actually improve your baseline happiness. **This** is the focus of this article – and not “feel happy” strategies.

Each item here is concluded with a suggested action step.

Understanding what authentic happiness is

Is happiness a feeling or a state of being? What is its nature, and what are its causes?

Wikipedia [defines happiness](#) as “a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy”. There can never be, any objective measurement of happiness based on **external achievements**. It is an interpretation of reality, and not a *result* of reality.

Actually, happiness is such a loaded term, that I wonder if it is the right one for what we are truly seeking. I personally prefer to speak of *fulfillment*, *contentment*, and *well-being*. The greeks, on the other hand, spoke of [eudamonia](#), the “well-lived life”

The problem seems to be understanding what causes human beings to continually experience this state. My research and self-experiments have led me to believe (that) there are three “kinds” of happiness: *personal*, *transpersonal*, (and) *transcendental*.

Personal happiness. Most people live by the belief that happiness is simply the result of accumulating as many pleasurable moments as possible, and of fulfilling one’s desires. Money, possessions, food, fun, sex, fame, power. Here is both the trap of “living as if there is no tomorrow” (the hedonistic blind focus in the present) and “living in hope of a better tomorrow” (putting off happiness to the achievement of a future goal).

The problem with this is that the pursuit of these pleasures and achievements can often be a painful and frustrating process (that is, an *unhappy process*). Besides, the happy-feeling resulting from these achievements is short-lived and usually less glorious than the promise (see Havard psychologist Daniel Gilbert on “[miswanting](#)”). On top of that, in many cases we must fight hard to keep what was gained. Finally, even if we are those rare beings that can always easily get and keep what we want, without much pain associate(d) with it, the inevitable result after a while is boredom and indifference. Not really the definition of a fulfilled life, right? Sounds more like an ocean of trouble, with some islands of happy feelings.

The verbs for personal happiness are: “to get”, “to feel”, “to achieve”.

Transpersonal happiness. Scientific research in the field of [positive psychology](#), pioneered by [Dr. Martin Seligman](#), PhD, proposes that a higher “zone” of happiness is to use one’s unique qualities and perspective in the service of *something larger than oneself*. This “higher cause” can revolve around family, community, science, art, world reform, spiritual transformation, etc. Here, happiness is more of a process, a continuum. A *path*, rather than an event. And because its cause is larger than one’s ego, so is the resulting joy.

Have a look at the [PERMA Model](#) of happiness to learn more.

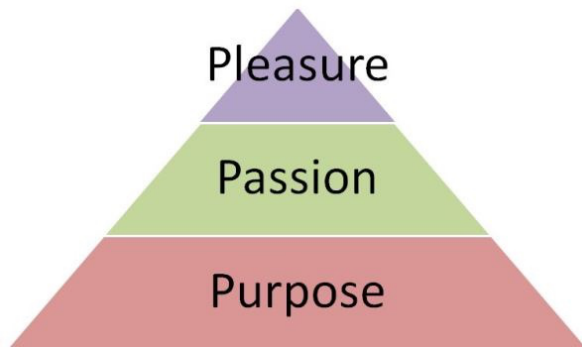
The verbs for transpersonal happiness are: “to do”, “to grow”, “to impact”

Transcendental happiness. A more uncommon view of happiness, proposed by many eastern traditions, is that it is our natural state of being. Our true self. If it is natural to us, why then is it not experience always? Just like health is inherent to our body but is

disturbed by bad habits and bad food, happiness is inherent to our heart but disturbed by negative mindsets.

The verbs for transcendental happiness are: “to be”, “to discover”, “to transform”.

These three “kinds” are not self-excluding. Each one has its place and you can have it all.



Ready to explore what are the causes of true well-being and lasting satisfaction in life?
Let's do this!

Part 1 – THE ESSENTIAL

1. Discover your true values

The single most important element in living a fulfilling life is understanding your true personal values, and aligning your existence to them. By “values” I don’t mean personal qualities like “honesty” and “integrity” – I mean those **activities & goals** that most consume your soul. It is what you are hungry for. Those things that you love to *think about, read about, talk about, learn about.*

Examples of values: family, building your career, athletic performance, art, spirituality, travelling, being a thought leader, developing your business, etc. It’s more of a **doing, not a having.**

How to discover your values? Take some minutes to look deeper into yourself and your life, and it will tell you where you naturally focus your valuable resources (time, energy, money, attention). Actually take the time to do this.

Here are some guiding questions:

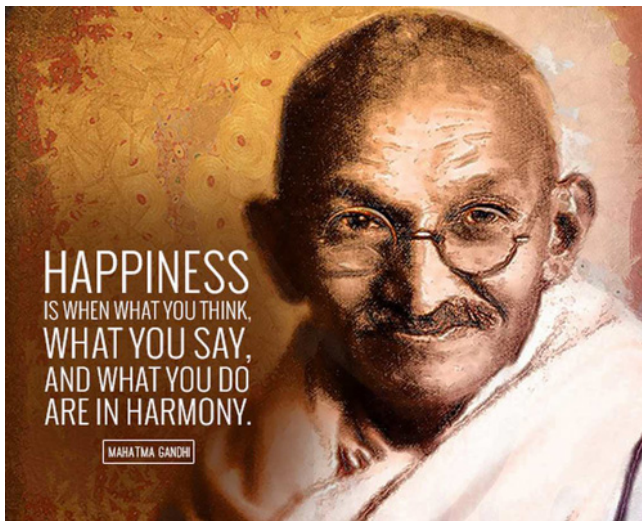
- How do you spend your free time?
- How do you spend your money?
- What in your life are you most reliable, disciplined and focused?
- What do you most think about and dream about?
- What do you love to learn, read about, and explore?
- What inspires you the most?
- Fast forward your life 10 years and look back. You are proud of achieving one thing. What is that?

The elements that appear repeatedly are your core values. It is here that you will find your passion, your direction. They are your map for every single decision in your life. Your map for a happy life.

This is such a deep topic that it deserves a post of itself (and probably will get). For now, to learn more about core values, I highly recommend the book [The Breakthrough Experience](#), by [Dr. John F. Demartini](#), an expert in this field.

Action step: Give yourself 20~30 minutes to contemplate on those questions and discover your core 3-4 values. If you are busy now, put in some time in your calendar for later

2. How to be happy? Align your life to your values



Your happiness is where your values are. It is what we *want* to do, what makes us *alive*. The more your daily thoughts and activities are in harmony with your values, the happier you are.

This is also one of the [power tool of coaches](#).

Now put your values in order, with the most important ones on top. And examine how much juice they are getting in the different aspects of your life. How much money, time, and energy are you spending on them? Are they actively directing your life, your daily choices? Or are they being suffocated and forgotten in the maze of the practicalities of living and other less important things? How can your authentic self be more in the steering wheel of your life?

Action step: Understand how much your core values are directing your life or not. Commit to making 3 simple changes to increase their power.

3. Leave aside the unessential – the art of saying “no”

Every “yes” you say is a “no” to a hundred things. Focus is the key to success in anything.

CLICK TO TWEET

Are you feeling overwhelmed with tasks? Maybe lacking headspace, or direction in life? Then you might have said yes to many things that are not truly essential, or not in

harmony with your personal values. Therefore, there is no space to move, or not enough energy to build what is really meaningful for you.

That extra project you took; the extra credit card; the relationship you are keeping and you don't really care about; the stuff you bought and don't really need; the old habits that are lurking around but have no meaning anymore.

When making decisions, every "yes" is a commitment to something, and a closure to other things. It is allowing something – an activity, a place, a person, a task – to occupy valuable resources in your life. You can produce more money, but the time spent on something or someone will never come back. Saying "yes" to anything also demands our commitment of energy and headspace (an increasingly rare commodity these days).

The inability to say no is actually rooted in fear. Fear of missing out an opportunity; fear of closing a door that we can never again reopen. But we simply [cannot have it all](#). And we fail to see that this fear is actually the very cause that makes us close many other doors. To explore more on this, check out Dan Ariely's classic [Predictably Irrational](#).

"Is this thing I'm thinking of saying 'yes' to gonna supporting my core values or not?", "How is this decision affect my present and future self?" Answering these questions, from moment to moment, is the human journey. In simple terms, our life, impact, and well-being, is determined by what we say yes to. It is a collective of yeses and nos.

"No" is not a negative word. It is not aggressive. It is not rejection. It is not selfish.

It is focus.

"No" is a powerful word, and can be used powerfully. All geniuses of humanity – in art, sport, politics, literature, science – were saying "yes" to a few things, and "no" to everything else. They were not chasing the *next shining object*.

"I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody" (Bill Cosby)

The contemplation of our finite nature, of limitation, of death, pushes human beings to accomplish extraordinary things, to live amazing lives. That is why many people that go through near-death experiences have their life transformed. For the better. They stop saying yes to things that don't really matter to them, and start focusing on what is really important.

That is why the movement of Minimalism is gaining traction in modern society. For more on this topic, I recommend Joshua Becker's blog, [Becoming Minimalist](#), and [this TED talk](#).

The foundation of a "happy life", therefore, is to discover our core values, align our life and actions to them, and religiously say "no" to all the needless things that are not in service. Trust your heart and your gut if you feel that a person or activity is simply not for you.

Action step: Write down 5 things you want to start saying "no" to in life. Take note of what you are losing (time, energy, money, head space) by allowing those things to creep in.

4. Act based on creative freedom – not conditioning

Since birth we have been exposed to so much conditioning – from our family, friends, society, media, environment. And still continue to be bombarded by thousands of messages every day. These outside voices have been heard and repeated so many times that they start having an independent life inside of us. No wonder it is hard to find our true voice, as opposed to the voice of other people's opinions. Yet, we only find fulfilment and freedom by following our own unique voice – our "personal legend", as Paulo Coelho would have it. So what to do?

The key is to discover what our core values are. This process can take time to mature in us. Taking some time alone, apart from all that is familiar from us, can help. Meditation, travel & retreats can give us the space to discover ourselves. A life coach can also be of service.

According to Australian nurse Bronnie Ware, who spent many years working with patients on their last weeks of life, the [top regret of the dying](#) is "*I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.*"

Your values will be your rule of thumb when deciding what is your voice and what is conditioning.

Action step: Next time you feel unsure what path to take, use your core values to discern your true path from your conditioning. Be determined to act based on your higher good, and not based on what you believe you "should do".

5. Live the present, but don't hunt the short-term

All good things come to those that live in the now, but are not limited to the now.

CLICK TO TWEET

Being exclusively present-oriented or future oriented are [both points of unbalance](#).

To be in the trap that “I'll be happy when...” is a cause of unhappiness. To be missing or sacrificing the present – the beautiful nature, the human relations, the rest needed, the peace and joy of being here and breath – is a cause of unhappiness. Believing happiness to be “in the future” is not only a risky assumption, but also betrays the concept of happiness as a state of being. It is not in the achievement of your goals – it is in the process of living your values.



But to live as if there is no tomorrow, to focus only on short-term goals is the other extreme of this scale. And is not sustainable either.

In his classic book, [Emotional Intelligence](#), Daniel Goleman describes an experiment in which four-year old kids are left in a room alone and told they can have two marshmallows if they wait for the experimenter to return from an errand. If they can't wait till then, they can have only one marshmallow, but they can have it now.

Some kids were able to hold off the fifteen to twenty minutes while others jumped on the one marshmallow – almost always within seconds. Years later the same kids were interviewed, and Goleman discovered that their ability to delay gratification revealed a great deal about the trajectory that child would likely take in their lives. The scholar

concluded that *“There is perhaps no psychological skill more fundamental than resisting impulse.”*

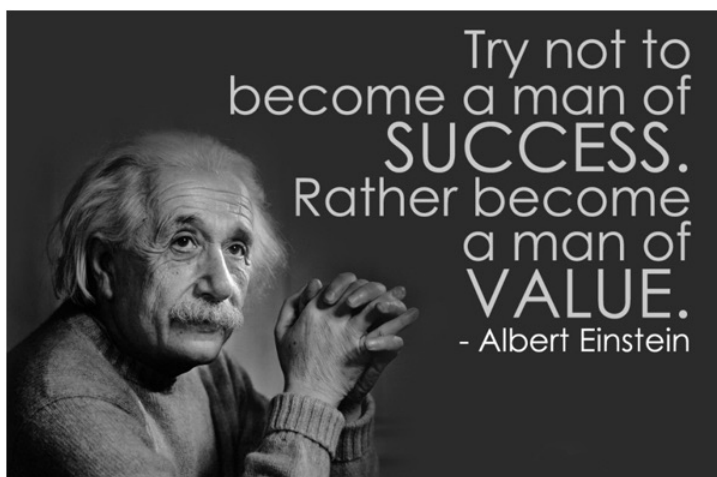
It is curious that many times our success in the short-term is exactly the reason of our failure in the long-term.

Living day by day with a higher direction in mind, yet with our feet on the ground, seems to be the balance point between present and future. A balance between [enjoying the now and designing the future](#).

Action step: Take note of 5 things that you are sacrificing in your present, for the promise of a better future. Then write down 5 places in your life where your focus on short-term goals may be harming the long-term direction you want for your life. You now know what tweaks you can make so you can be both more present, and also focused on the right things.

6. Don't chase extrinsic values

While focus on extrinsic life values may lead to a quicker satisfaction of these desires, true fulfilment will not be found down this path. On the other hand, there are countless testimonials of people that focused first on the “important stuff” in life and, as a result, also got the extrinsic goals met.



There is a lot of research in this sense. PhD professor Ronald Inglehart, found that once middle-class comforts are in place, the link between wealth and wellbeing “is surprisingly weak (indeed, virtually negligible).”

In his best-selling book on the science of motivation, [Why We Do What We Do](#), [Edward Deci](#) tells us:

“The researchers found that if any of the three extrinsic aspirations – for money, fame, or beauty – was very high for an individual relative to the three intrinsic aspirations, the individual was also more likely to display poorer mental health. For example, having an unusually strong aspiration for material success was associated with narcissism, anxiety, depression, and poorer social functioning as rated by a trained clinical psychologist... In contrast, strong aspirations for any of the intrinsic goals – meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contributions – were positively associated with well-being. People who strongly desired to contribute to their community, for example, had more vitality and higher self-esteem. When people organize their behavior in terms of intrinsic strivings (relative to extrinsic strivings) they seem more content – they feel better about who they are and display more evidence of psychological health.”

Action step: Review your core values. What is driving you in life? Are these extrinsic values or intrinsic values? If they are extrinsic, what is the bigger value behind them?

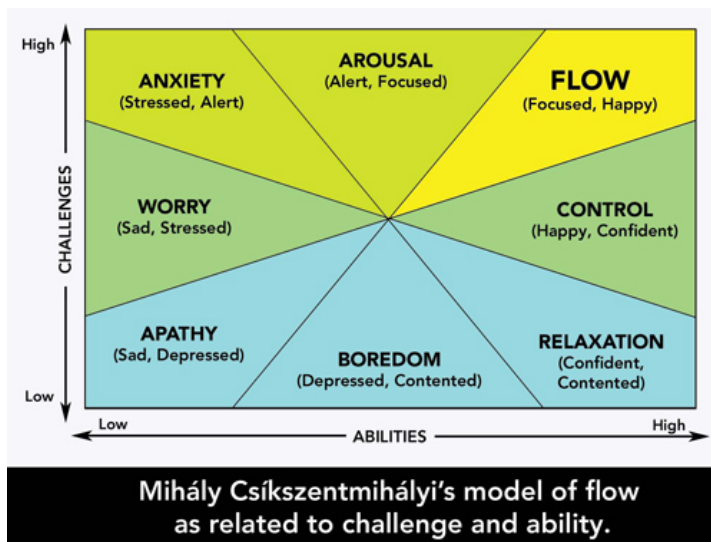
7. Be careful how you feed your senses

Our body is fed by food, water, and other elements; our mind is fed through ideas and the five senses. The quality of our mind and internal wellbeing is profoundly formed by the things we see, listen to, watch, smell, touch, read, think about, etc. How are you feeding your senses?

The music you choose to hear [affects your moods](#). Depending on the [genre](#), it can make you inspired, calm, emotional; or violent, depressed, confused. The same goes with the [movies we watch](#), books we read, and all other types of media, [environment](#), food ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), and people.

Action step: Make a list of the top five things that you are feeding your senses and do not serve your wellbeing. Reflect whether you really need these things in your life or not. Commit to one small change.

8. Find a place of Flow



“Flow” is that beautiful state of total integration in your present activity. You are there with your whole body, mind and soul, and its as if you disappear, and there is nothing else in the world. Total concentration.

Maybe it is when you are running, or reading a great book, or giving a speech, or drawing. Perhaps when thinking deeply about some matter, or when meditating. Different people access the Flow according to their own passion. It is what moves artists, athletes, writers, and entrepreneurs to give their whole selves into their project. It is also one of the [cornerstones](#) of the Daoist philosophy.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of [Finding Flow](#), and one of the pioneers in this research, wrote:

“In all the activities people in our study reported engaging in, enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities. Playing tennis, for instance, is not enjoyable if the two opponents are mismatched. The less skilled player will feel anxious, and the better player will feel bored. The same is true for every other activity... Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.”

To expand on this topic, check out this article on the blog [Pursuit-Of-Happiness](#).

Action step: What are the activities in your life that you are more likely to find Flow? How can you deepen your involvement in these activities?

9. Nurture your Spirituality



Several [studies](#) point out the relationship between spiritual development and personal well-being. A 2012 review of more than 326 studies of mainly adult populations found that out of those 326 studies, 256 (79%) found only *positive associations* between religiosity/spirituality and well-being.

For some people, spirituality come through their religion; but spirituality and religion are different things. You can be spiritual without being religious – that is, without joining any religion or church.

Spirituality does not require you do give your power away to some external person or institution, nor to have blind faith; it is not dogmatic nor ritualistic. It is not a cult. It does not limit your freedom and it does not make you close minded. As a side note, there studies that show benefits of [meditation](#) regardless of belief or religious inclination.

True spirituality is an invitation to look deeper into your life, your values, and discover your true Self.

Exploring this topic more in-depth will be a subject of other posts. For now, you can start by reading some [meditation quotes](#).

Action step: Start looking for ways to develop your spirituality, a deeper perspective and values in life.

10. Master your mind

Buddhism and other ancient traditions emphasise that our mind can be our greatest friend or our worst enemy. It can make our life heaven or hell.

“More than those who hate you, more than all your enemies, an undisciplined mind does greater harm.” – The Buddha

There is no doubt about this – there can be no happiness while we are enslaved by our own shadows. No factor seems to be more important for our wellbeing than the state of our minds. And yet, for the average person [up to 70%](#) of ones thoughts is negative self-talk. This leads to [emotional overload and stress](#).

“Ok, I get it”, I hear you say, “but how to control the mind?”. Thing is, you cannot control the *first thought* that arises in the mind in any given situation – that is simply a conditioned response. But you can exercise control over the *second thought* and the ones after. Here lies your power (and responsibility).

For example, I`m sitting in the couch in a Sunday afternoon and the thought arises “I`m lonely”. Whether I “accept” this and continue on this train of thought (“yeah, nobody loves me...”, etc.) or simply let it pass, its my choice. I can also choose to instead think “yes, I`m alone at this moment, but its good, I need some self-space”. One way leads to anxiety, victimization and self-pity – the other doesn`t.

Thousands of times per day we make choices like this, although most times it is automatic and we are not aware of it. Becoming aware of our mind processes and exercising our power to direct our attention is the mastery of the mind. And this is greatly facilitated by practices such as meditation and mindfulness. There are also techniques [developed by psychologists](#).

The message, here, is that the way you feel, the way you think, is **not a necessity**. It is merely a *learned habit*. It is, in great part, arbitrary. You have the power to change it. You are giving power to your thoughts by thinking them, by engaging in a conversation with them, and believing them. If they are creating suffering, remember that *you have the power to think something different*.

The mind cannot hold on to two opposite feelings at the same time, so focusing on developing positive thought patterns and emotions already goes a long way. Watch Mathieu Ricard (ex-Phd scientist turned monk) [expand on this](#).

These are concepts and skills I explore in-depth in my course on [overcoming fear](#), and on my [beginners meditation course](#).

Action step: Become aware of your internal dialogs. Be vigilant of your negative thoughts. Next time negative thinking kicks in, exercise your power to redirect your thoughts to something else, to reinterpret the facts, or to simply ignore. In the beginning you will succeed only for a few seconds. With practice and persistence, however, it becomes natural and easy.

PART 2 – MINDSET & ATTITUDES

Some mindsets empower a life of success and fulfilment; others create difficulties and pain. These can be learned by experience (the hard way), by reading good personal development material, by engaging with mentors and life coaches, or by reflection and [meditation](#). Here are my findings from these learning paths.

11. Face everything as an opportunity to grow.

This is probably the most empowering attitude I've ever encountered. It is a good medicine against many of the causes of fear, frustration, impatience, anxiety, and stress.

If you face every event, every challenge, as part of the way, then nothing can disturb you. You will not fear, nor complain, nor blame, nor be pissed off by things that happen. Instead, in your mind there will be only the question: "What can I learn from this?".

An event doesn't mean anything by itself; it is always only what you make of it. You have the power to make it positive or negative.

You get a "no" as an answer. Your car breaks. It's raining on a Sunday again. You can't finish your project. Got sick. Nobody is buying your product. Your son doesn't listen to you.



You can resist these things. Close yourself up. Fight them. You now have a problem, and that is unfortunate.

Or you can be open. Breathe deeply. Acknowledge what is there. Look for your lesson, and for the next step. You now simply have a new context, and that is an opportunity.

Performance psychologist John Eliot, author of the somewhat controversial [Overachievement](#), has a very interesting expression: “eat stress like an energy bar”. Yes, even emotions like stress, anger, envy, can be used for something positive, as motivators for action. Depending on our attitude these energies can be empowering or disempowering.

Life’s challenges are polishing you, preparing you for bigger things.

Action step: Next time a challenge comes, kiss its face, learn the lesson, and move on.

12. Expectation creates disappointment

Expectation is wishful thinking about the future. It sets a self-imposed standard of what is to happen. A bit like drawing a line on the sand and deciding that “if it is above this line I’ll be happy; if not, I’ll be upset”.

Some expectations are natural, and not as harmful. When I buy a product from the supermarket, I expect it to not be rotten, and will have an unpleasant surprise if it is.

Other expectations, however, are just a recipe for disaster. For instance, expecting things to be easy when learning something, or working on my business, or trying to navigate through life, will create a lot of frustration. If, instead, I expect things to be hard, I’ll be well prepared. If they turn out to be easy, I’m happy; if they turn out to be hard... well, no surprises here. After all, usually what is worth having doesn’t come easy.

Similarly, hoping to get lucky, to be accepted, to have quick success, to have no conflicts – all these expectations bring about pain. We’d be better off just *doing what we need to do and leaving the future to take care of itself*.

While it may be impossible to live without any expectations at all, when we learn to be more conservative and “soft” about our expectations, we suffer less the consequences of their violation. Keeping in mind that they are arbitrary and self-imposed, we tend to have more flexibility and flow.

Manage your expectations, and you will rarely be disappointed.

Check out also the create posts about the subject on [LifeHacker](#), [Huffington Post](#) and [Tiny Buddha](#).

Action step: What needless expectations are you imposing on yourself right now? Do you really need them?

13. Yesterday is graveyard... How to forget the past and reinvent your history

Victimization, remorse, guilt, regret. No doubt these are unhappy feelings, and they all have something in common: they are anchored in the past.

What are you dwelling on? Your past failures? A betrayal? A gaffe you made on the last dinner party? Something unjust that happened to you?

The past is good for one thing only: learning. We need to reflect on what has happened, learn from it, and move on.

Your past does not define you – unless you allow it to. You are not what has happened to you; you are what you choose to become. Your *mind* defines you. And mind creates what it constantly thinks about. Suddenly over thinking the past doesn't sound like a good idea anymore...

It is usually pain (and not pleasure), that keeps us looking back. The desire to “correct” the past is one of the main reasons why we get stuck in it. And yet this desire goes against a basic law of nature.

If we reflect deeply about how this tendency is hurting our present, how it is hindering our life here and now, we will have the motivation needed to make a decision to let go and stop looking back. Of course, if possible it also helps to get physically apart from places and people who take you back to your past.

Another approach is to actually **reinvent your past**. Yes, it is possible, and it is not hallucination. The fact is, the past that we remember is what we have subjectively experienced, not the raw facts. It is the facts + our thinking/feeling. It is not reality, but rather our colourful description of it – and we have the power to change this. If somebody did something bad to us, we cannot start believing that they simply didn't do that (we actually can, but that's delusional); but we can change our belief about what that *means* to us.

And that basically changes everything, because for the rest of our life we will remember our *story* of the event, it's ending, and not the experience of the event.

Marty Lefkoe, author of the best-seller Re-Create Your Life, teaches a process that can be used to reinterpret past events in a simple way:

1. *Identify the undesirable pattern*
2. *Name the underlying belief*

3. *Identify the source of the belief in memory, including as much sensory detail as possible*
4. *Describe possible alternate interpretations of the memory*
5. *Realize that your original belief is an interpretation, not reality*
6. *Consciously choose to reject the original belief as “false”*
7. *Consciously choose to accept your reinterpretation as “true”*

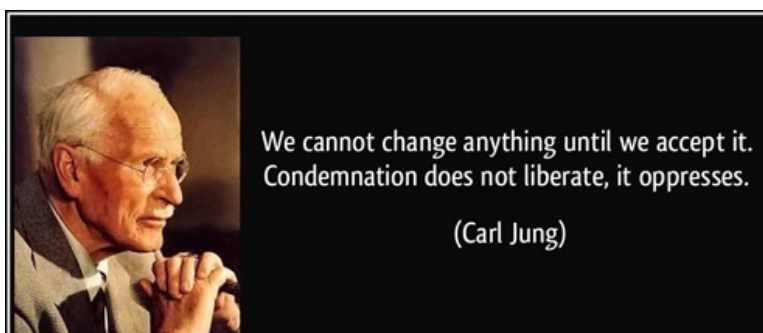
Both interpretations are valid. Your reality will be defined by the one you choose to accept. Your choice.

Action step: Identify where in your past you usually get stuck in, and go through the reinterpretation process.

14. Accept the things you cannot control or change

Whether we like it or not, many things in life we cannot change. We cannot change other people, nor the behaviour of the market. Other things can be changed, but only with colossal effort during a long period of time.

Accepting reality is not a passive attitude. It does not make us weak. It does require humility, of course, but it empowers us to respond to life in a wiser, more effective, way.



We cannot fight all battles. So let's choose wisely what to accept, and what to focus to change.

Action step: Are you struggling to accept some major reality in yourself or your life? What would happen if instead of asking “how can I change this” you asked “how can I make use of this?”

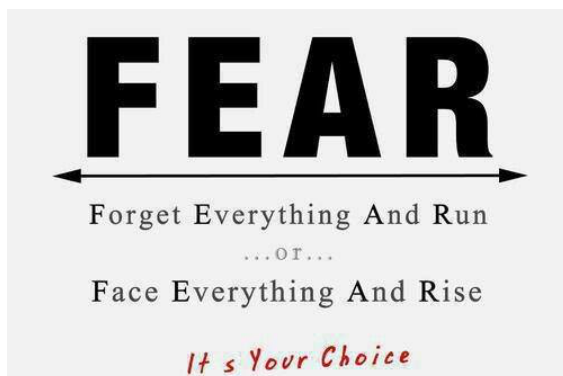
15. Move in the direction of your fears

Yes, you read that right.

Have this determination that no fear must arise unmet. Have this obsession that every fear must be confronted and conquered. This unleashing of your inner hero will deepen your life and broaden your heart.

Fear is one of the most instinctive human emotions. It can take many forms, such as worry (fear about future circumstances), doubt (fear about making the wrong choice) and hatred (the aggressive response to the feared object). Most likely you will experience it your whole life, so it might be a good idea to learn how to deal with it.

The problem is not that fear arises. The problem, if any, is how you *respond* to it. Yes, believe it or not, you have total freedom as to how to respond. Maybe it is hard to experience it, because you might not have exercised this mind-muscle much. But it's there.



Experiencing danger & risk, can be character building as well. [Even for your kids.](#)

A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor. And skilled sailors have a depth in their live that novices don't.

Happy are those that are bigger than their fears. And how to be bigger than your fear? *Act* bigger than your fear. When in doubt, close your eyes and take the leap. Don't cling to something just because of fear. It makes you a prisoner.

Hey! Fear is not a big deal. Just some electrical impulses in your brain, coupled with a bit of chemicals running through your blood. Will this keep you powerless while life runs you by?

Action step: Think of something that makes you afraid. Take one small step every day in the direction of that fear. It's important that it be a small step, otherwise you may lose motivation. Feel the confidence that comes from acting despite the fear. Gradually increase the boldness of your actions.

16. Embrace impermanence

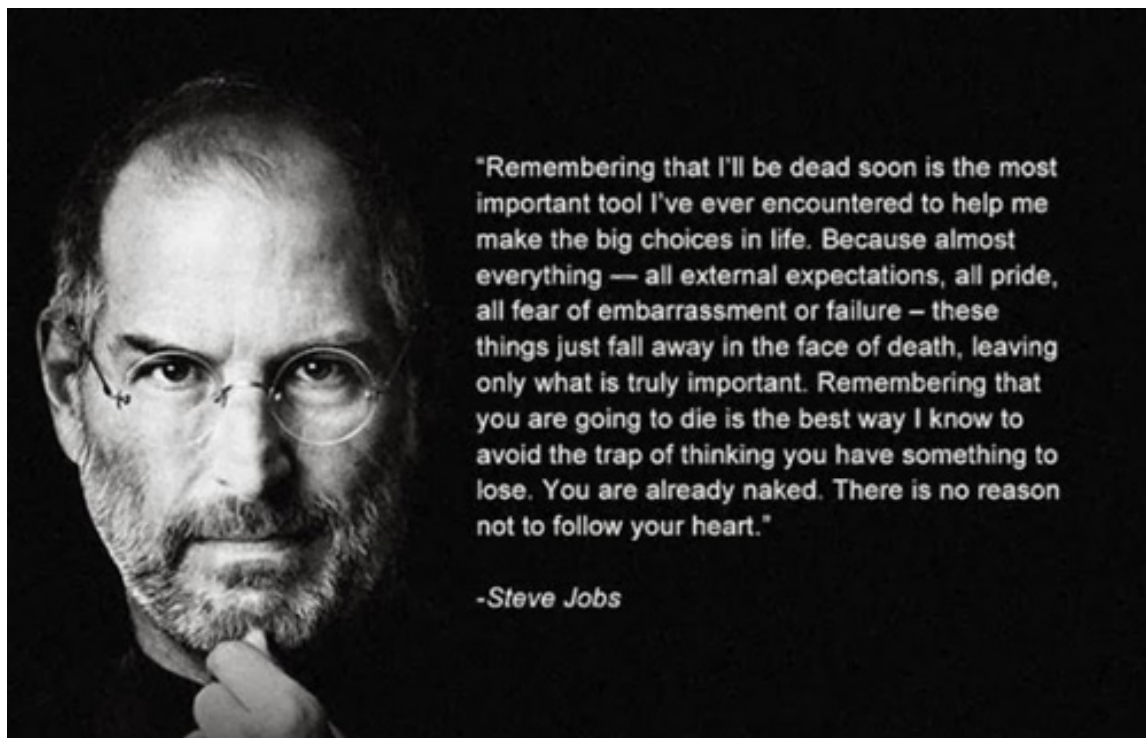
Not understanding and accepting impermanence is a cause of unhappiness.

Impermanence is the fundamental law of our existence. This is the only thing that is certain in this life: everything changes. Time eats away everything, and nothing remains the same. Your time will be spent. Money will be gone. Many things that you cared about will either disappear, or you will no longer care about them.

The good news is that whatever negative feeling or unpleasant situation you are experiencing will also pass. There was a time when it did not exist; then it shows up for a limited time, and after that it goes back to not existing.

Several ancient traditions emphasised the need to contemplate the fleeting nature of our lives, from Buddha to the Stoics (who called this exercise [Memento Mori](#)).

A deeper life opens up when we understand and embrace impermanence and our mortality, and [learn its lessons](#). A deep (and often unnoticed) fear in our hearts is released once we accept impermanence down to our bones. As a result we get more focused, and we are freed up to live a more amazing life.



Action step: Spend some time reflecting about how everything constantly changes. Think of something that you are very attached to, or a situation that is bothering you. Realize that this too shall pass.

17. Happy thoughts – choosing optimism, choosing happiness

Yes, wellbeing and happiness is a [matter of choice](#).

“Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think.” – Martin Seligman from [Learned Optimism](#)

In this wonderful book the author explains the difference between optimism and the (much in vogue) “positive thinking”: the former is learning a new set of cognitive skills, while the later is repeating “positive affirmations” to yourself. And the skills we need to learn is that of changing our “explanatory styles”, which is how we chose to talk to ourselves when interpreting what’s happening.

The following experiment was made with two dogs. The first dog is slightly shocked but has a lever he can push to stop the shocks. He quickly learns to stop the shocks. He’s in good “psychological” shape. A second dog does not have a lever, so he can’t stop the shocks. His shocks stop only when the *first dog* hits *his* lever. So, in effect, the shocks are random for him. Our second dog “learns” that he is helpless in the face of these shocks.

Here’s what’s fascinating: The dogs are then moved to a new area and taught a new way to avoid the shocks. So, now they can BOTH avoid the shocks at will. Remarkably, although the first dog avoids the shocks, the second dog curls up in the corner and whimpers as the shock – which *he could have avoided* – is administered. He has learned helplessness.

The second dog may feel sorry for himself. He may blame the first dog. He may complain. All of these are disempowering.

Or he may learn to see things differently.

We condition ourselves through our own self-talk, and then become prisoners of our interpretations, and blind to reality. Whether you tell yourself that you can or can’t, you are right. That is why if you want to create instant change in your life, watching your self-language seems a great place to start. How you describe your reality is how you *define* it, how you create it.

Here is the model the author proposes for an optimist explanatory style:

- **Permanence** – is what happened likely to continue? Optimists think that if it’s a bad thing it’s a fluke. If it’s a good thing, they tend to think it’s permanent. The opposite holds true for the pessimist: Good things are the flukes and bad things are more likely to recur.

- **Pervasiveness** – Does it reflect your whole life? Is it “universal” or is it “specific”? With a good event, the optimist is more likely to extend it to her whole life. With a bad event, she will tend to isolate the incident as specific to that situation. The opposite holds true for the pessimist.
- **Personalisation** – is it internal or external? Something good happens. An optimist pats himself on the back (internal), thinking he did a good job. If the same thing happens to a pessimist, he is more likely to attribute the success to luck, other people’s hard work, or something else outside of his control (external).

How we interpret events can maximise happiness and energize us, or make us feel terrible. And the good news is: it’s in our power to decide. It is an emotional intelligence skill that can be developed.

Of course, many situations in life call for a dose of pessimism, caution, and “defensive thinking”, so our optimism should not blind us either. Like anything in excess, irrational optimism is also harmful – though arguably less harmful than irrational pessimism. So maybe this section should be called “choosing *balanced* optimism”.

True optimism is more a reaction to the present than an expectation about the future. It is not about blindly believing that things will always turn out the best. That violates the principle of managing your expectations (see point 12). True optimism is about choosing to interpret events in a positive light when they do happen. And not being attached to past negative talk. It is being open that anything can happen, yet at the same time confident that “I can do something positive with anything that comes”.

There are several studies on how being optimistic positively affects physical and mental health ([1](#), [2](#)), romantic [relationships](#), [athletic performance](#), [career](#), [business](#) and the [economy](#).

Check out this article to read more on [optimism & positive psychology](#), and this one about how happiness is also a [deliberate choice](#).

Action step: Identify three places in your life you are having negative self-talk. How could you have a more empowering interpretation of that situation? Is the negative self-talk based on reality now, or mere learned habit?

18. Be wrong

Needing to be right all the time can be extremely limiting and energy consuming. Having the courage to be vulnerable and accept one's mistakes is liberating. Whether you accept it not, reality is that many times you will be wrong. By saying, "I was wrong" more often – to yourself and others – you will find more compassion, humility and flexibility. People will trust you more.

Having the courage to be vulnerable and accept one's mistakes is liberating.

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It is good to always aim for the highest – as long as we understand that perfection is unattainable, both in work and in relationships. Nothing is perfect; even the earth is not perfectly round. You will invariably make bad decisions.

Understanding how often we are wrong makes us be more compassionate towards ourselves. We see that many times we simply did the best we could at that time – we need is to educate ourselves, not punish ourselves. We will also tend to criticise others less, and be more empathetic, which will improve our social relations. Humility pays off.

Personally, it was not easy for me to accept and practice this lesson. But once I tried a few times, I started taking pleasure in it. There is a certain unburdening of the heart that happens, which makes it worth it even if only for that feeling. My values and points of view were changing by time, even to something opposite, and I saw that contradicting myself was a sign of growth, not confusion or unreliability.

Action step: Is it hard for you to accept being wrong? If so, try this: look back and see some opinion you had that you now see was wrong. Or maybe some bad decision. Then clearly express that you were wrong to a person involved in that situation. Depending on the magnitude of what happened, this "little" act can save a relationship, a company, a life.

19. Have some trust

One of the qualities of developing your spirituality is the trust on something larger than yourself. Call it God, the Universe, Dharma, Life – doesn't matter. It's not about a whimsical expectation that things will happen according to your preference, but a faith

that things will happen in favor of your greater good. It's a conviction that, if you put your best foot forward, the universe will respond.

Does one really need trust? No. But life is more beautiful with it. Trust in something larger accomplishes four important things:

- makes you optimistic (section 17)
- decreases your worries and doubts, allowing you to forget about the future and focus more on the present
- forces you to accept things you cannot change
- takes you out of your little world
- you are less prone to mental masturbation of "what if..."

There is also scientific evidence that [trust makes us happy](#). And [here](#) is a podcast episode where one of my guests speaks about the value of surrender.

Action step: Is it time to take a leap of faith somewhere in your life? How would your feelings and actions be different if you had more trust?

20. Dare to disagree

"It's always better to be at the bottom of the ladder you want to climb than the top of the one you don't" [Marc and Angel Chernoff](#).

Free yourself from the [crowd mentality](#). Be a lion. You will not find happiness in the life of a sheep – at most comfort.

The lion finds his own path, or carves one out if none is found. The sheep follows the beaten road.

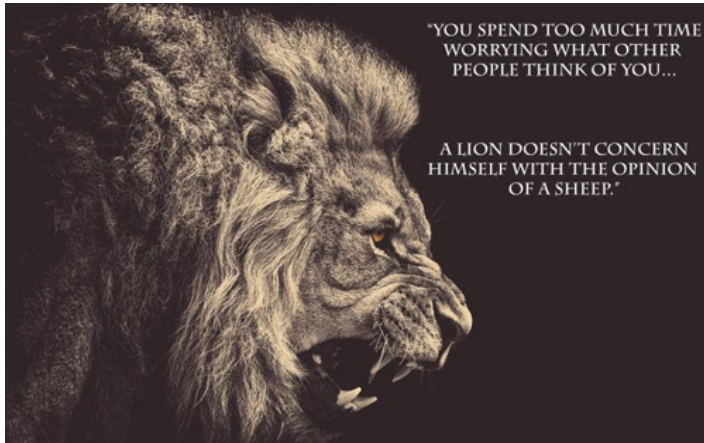
The lion walks alone if needed, and is fearless. The sheep is fearful and moves in herds. The lion roars loud and clear. The sheep's sound is weak and hesitant.

The lion rests deep, confident he can handle any challenge. The sheep is worried about tomorrow.

The lion makes the news. The sheep reads the news.

The lion creates and innovates. The sheep follows standards and repeats patterns.

The lion will fight, even though wounded. The sheep will run, even before a fight.



“Be a light unto yourself”, as the Buddha said. [Sing your own song](#). The world needs your unique gift, presence, perspective. No need to apologise for your existence and your dreams.

Action step: Are you being a sheep in any place in your life? Awaken the lion within.

21. Money matters, but not really

What can money do for you, and how much of it do you really need?

It's a huge topic. But for the purposes of this post we can say there are broadly three types of attitudes when it comes to money:

- It's not important (and other limiting beliefs)
- It's extremely important and the reason of my efforts
- Money is a resource, and its important for my life, but it's not a measure of success or happiness

The first two will make you make you suffer. The balanced point of view will set you in the right path.

There is plenty of research concluding that money does matter, but that once a [certain threshold of comfort is achieved](#) (some studies suggest 60~70k a year), it matters less and less to the overall wellbeing of the person. After the basic needs of life of oneself and one's family are met, to continue to chase money is more a cause of dissatisfaction than fulfillment (refer to point number 6 of this post), especially if driven by peer comparison pressure and consumerism. The most valuable thing money can buy is time, and it is how you use your time that will determine how happy you are.

Once the point of comfort has been reached, feeling happy with what we have, and focusing our efforts on life's intrinsic values, seems to be the best use of money. Also, experiments show that spending it on others can boost our happiness [more than spending it on ourselves](#) (see also [GreaterGood](#) and [ScienceMag](#)).

Action step: Discover what is your attitude about money. Are you holding any limiting beliefs, or over-focused on accumulating wealth?

22. Do your inner work

All of these insights have one thing in common: they require some inner work. These keys are worthless unless you actually use them. You will need to put in some thought about yourself and your life, develop more self-awareness, and then decide to make a change. Most people are not taking this path – they are simply looking for patches.

Solve one problem at its root and you will never need to solve it again. If you keep coming back to the same problems, on the same level, then maybe something is not right.

No shortcuts here. No silver bullet. Just the pains of personal growth – like giving birth to your new self. Designed by you! The results pay off big time.

The secret here is to fall in love with the *process* of growth. With the feeling of freeing oneself from old shackles. Enjoying the virtues we are developing.

Action step: Create some space in your life for self-awareness and personal development. Nothing will make a bigger impact than this investment in yourself. Think what could be your first step in this journey.

Conclusion

Wow, you actually read the whole post! I'm grateful for your company

Each of these points is actually quite a big subject, and I attempted to present it "briefly". Let me know what you would like me to expand upon.

Please leave a comment with your honest feedback. I read and respond to every comment.

What was your biggest learning? What do you wish to read more about?

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